

## [A Local Tale]

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Francis Donovan -Thomaston

December 15, 1938 A LOCAL TALE

George Richmond (previously interviewed)

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"Jack Davis tell you about the time Port Lumpkins was training for a race and pret' near got pinched? Port used to strip down and run up North Main street early in the morning. Did it every day while he was in training, then he'd go to work. Well, the 6.15 train in the morning from Winsted to Bridgeport used to carry quite a load. One morning one of them looked out the window and saw Port running up the road like the devil was after him, and near's they could make out he hadn't any clothes on.

"They was all excited about it, and when they got to town, they told the station agent to get the constable out after a crazy man who was runnin' up the Torrington road. The agent called Tom McDonald, who used to be constable and he went up the Torrington road lookin' for a lunatic, but by that time, of course, Port was out of sight.

"Same thing happened next mornin". And they called Tom again, but he couldn't find hide nor hair of any crazy man. But a little investigation cleared it up, and Port had a good laugh. So'd everybody else except Tom McDonald. Port said the train whistle was his cue to git back to the house as fast as he could so he'd be in time for work; and every morning when he heard it, he put on a sprint. No wonder they thought he was crazy."

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F. Donovan ON THE OLD WAYS

Frank Hoyt (previously interviewed)

["I don't know that this will have any value for you, but it seems to me that if anything is written about the clock business, there ought to be some comparison made between the modern way of doing things and the free and easy attitude of the help in the old days. For instance, the parties?] we used to have parties in the dial room almost every pay day. We used to have lunch along in the afternoon, and then the first thing you knew there's be a little informal dancing, maybe somebody'd have a harmonica, or maybe they'd

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sing or whistle an accompaniment. We had a foreman named Holt, a good fellow, but nervous...You could hardly blame him of course. He'd go around whispering, "Sh-h-h! Take it easy now, or we'll all get in trouble!" But nobody paid much attention to him. [?] start here [?] "The superintendent's name was Simpkins--he had a little cubby hole of an office right across the way, and he could sometimes see heads bobbing up and down in our room as the boys and girls danced. But just about that time he began to be troubled with rheumatism, and he probably found it convenient to be nearsighted as well.

["He quit not long after he began to get infirm. He got so he couldn't hardly leave his office, and the higher ups didn't like it because he couldn't get around to the office conferences. When he built that house up on Judson street and retired, he was hardly able to walk.

"Fred Hoffman was super after he quit, and Hoffman himself?" 3 [left during the war and went over around Plainville or somewhere and started to manufacture brushes. Was pretty successful too, I understand.?" [?] [?] "The office system in the old days was very simple. Each factory had one timekeeper. You came in the morning or noon and put your check in the box if you were on time, if not you'd tell the timekeeper and he'd mark down your time. Levi Parsons was head bookkeeper and he had one girl helping him, and at that time they did millions of dollars worth of business a year. [?] "In the stock room they had a boy named Bill Marsh, and all you had to do was go in and ask for what you wanted, and you'd get it. Maybe some of them abused this privilege. They began to find shortages in stock, so they decided to put in a "system." They brought an efficiency man in, and he turned the place upside down--put in new arrangements here, and took out old ones there--and it cost the company plenty. But it was the same old story--when they started to rush the help and eliminate old methods they got a lot of ruined work, and in the end they couldn't use the new system. Had to throw it out. [?] ["You talk about those old tower clock record books--it's a wonder they saved them--they made a bonfire of all their old records one time--they would have been just the thing for you--burned every last one of them. They even destroyed the old ledgers Seth Thomas used in his store. [?]

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"Old man Gordon--head of the tower clock department--he said he was going to take a vacation some day and go around to all the? 4 [places for which he had supervised the making of tower clocks. Said in that way he'd get to see the world without having to consult a guide book. But he only got one vacation in all the time he was there, so far as I know--and then he went to visit an aunt of his out in Kansas.?] X [?] [?] "I used to have to go to the Case shop some times to do special work, and one time I met a Mr. Griswold who was in charge of the celluloid work. He told me some fellow in Waterbury had invented this process for some other line, and that they'd begun to use it for clocks instead. [?] "It was just about this time they were trying out the stem-wind watch, and afterwards they began to make cyclometers for bicycles--there's a product that's probably completely out of existence. Two fellows right in this shop invented a stem-winder and tried to interest the company in it--but they couldn't see it. So the boys sold it to Elgin. When the company heard about that they lost their jobs. ["This Mr. Higginbotham --oh yes, he knew watches--he used to give lectures on watchmaking right here in the town hall. After he left here, he got a job in the South Bend Watch Company. Then there was George Neil, who came here after Higginbotham to take charge of the watch shop. He opened a jewelry store after they discontinued the watches. He was also very good.?] [?]

"When they first put in the lithograph process, the presses required a very muscular man--I know I never could do it. They had a fellow named Mal Johnson working on them, but he had some kind of domestic trouble--he began talking to himself and they took him 5 to an asylum. [?] For printing what?

"The only improvement in this type of work has been the introduction of photography instead of the old handwork. Most of it now is on aluminum or zinc plates. In the old days those stones used to weigh sometimes [300?] pounds each and they cost thirty five cents a pound.

"There's a story I almost forgot--just to show you what I meant when I said it was a free and easy establishment--they don't stand for any horseplay now--there was a fellow

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named Frank Davis used to be assistant foreman of the plating room. One time he caught a bee, I don't know just how, but anyway he went out and stuck it down Phil Ryan's shirt--he worked at the casting bench--it stung him good and everybody roared when he went hopping around the place. He took it good-natured but he waited his chance, and one day he saw Davis sitting on the edge of the hot water tank. Ryan sneaked up on him--stuck out his hand---and went 'B-z-z-z-z-z!' like a bee--Davis fell right in the tank. And everybody had the laugh on him." continue on [?] 8 [?]

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"Young people today don't know how to save money. First thing they get their hands on some, they think what they can buy with it, usually a car. Put money down, first installment pay the rest when you can--that's the system. Don't make no difference whether their job's uncertain, or what--whether they've got a good chance to pay it off before the finance company takes it back--they'll buy it--take a chance.

"Installment buyin's done a lot to ruin the country. Folks 6 saved money years ago--put it into real estate. Bought their own homes--that was sound business. Company used to give the help a chance to buy the company houses and lots of 'em bought that way.

"Installment buyin' and chain stores, and holdin' companies. Business is too complicated these days. Topheavy--a system built on inflation, and it won't work out unless they's some big changes made. Never had no installment buyin' years ago, nor no holdin' companies either, that I knew anything about. The big companies was controlled by one corporation, not piled on top of each other.

"Few big companies out in Chicago controls the whole food industry. Would you believe that? That's what makes Chicago such a big town--be bigger than New York some day. They control the meat and they control the other stuff too. Look at these darn chain stores--they got into town here and they pret' near killed off the independent merchants. Now they're puttin' up a big squawk because they got some law lined up that might do

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away with 'em. Tell you how many people they employ, and all that. I tell you, they just aim to drive out the independent merchant, and then when they get conditions the way they want 'em, you watch 'em skyrocket their prices.

"I remember how they got to come in here in town. They was a peddler used to come up from Waterbury, and he bought stuff from 'em down there and sold it to people here in town. He could undersell the local merchants and still make a profit. When they found out what he was doin' they opened up a store here. Sure, people patronized 'em, 'cause they was gettin' things cheaper.

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"They don't give you no credit--not them--not if people was starvin' to death. The old merchants here used to carry a man--and they never were sorry, as a rule--always got paid in the end. If times were hard, they had hundreds of dollars on the books, but they knew the money was good. There's good debts and bad debts.

"Just like old Doc Goodwin, he used to charge a little heavy on some cases and if they complained he'd say: "Them that can pay has got to pay for them that can't' He used to be my landlord. Paid \$15 rent when I went in there, and paid \$22 when I left. Raised it a dollar, when he put in lights, the old Doc did, and that was the only time. New landlord, he jumped it up soon's he got hold of it, and every time he put somethin' new in, up it would go couple more dollars.

"Rents was low when I first went by myself--me and my sister kept house after the folks died--we paid fifteen dollars, that was pretty high--average was ten or twelve. Some paid twenty--but they had all improvements.

"Company houses were cheap rents--all them little houses over on the East side was built by the factories for their help--I guess they don't rent for more than twelve or fifteen dollars to this day. The company used to own a lot of real estate when I was a young man--they were making money too. Now they ain't paid a dividend on the common stock in Lord

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knows when. There ought to be a law about that. Some of the stockholders get all the gravy and the others don't get nothin.' That kind of thing keeps up, this country will be just like Europe--few big fellows will own everything. 8 [?] "The company was always buildin'--expandin', in my day. They made money for the stockholders, and they put some back into the business. They were always buildin' on new wings onto the shops, buyin new machinery, openin' new offices. Used to make 300 alarm clocks a day--one time. I bet they don't make 300 a week now. Good management, with a few smart men at the head of a business and not too much non-production department--that was the secret. That's the mainspring, you might say, if you was comparin' the business to a clock. [Old man Wehrle, the model maker, he came to me one time when I was workin' on springs and he says, 'What's the most important parts of a clock?' I says, 'You got me, thats somethin' I can't tell you,' and he says, 'The mainspring and the verge. They're the main things, the rest is built around them.'?] [?]

"Now'days they ain't satisfied with a small profit. I'll give you an example was told to me, just the other day, happened right here in this town. There's a local contractor, I don't know who he is, but be bid on some out of town job and they turned him down. Somebody asked him why didn't he make his bid small enough, and he says, 'If I can't make at least 65 per cent profit, I won't take the job.' [?]

"Ain't that a nice state of affairs? That leaves 35 per cent to be split up among the help. That's the way with these companies, lately. They figure their profits too damn big and they don't leave nothin' over to pay the help. They ain't willing to put nothin' back into the business."

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